

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
BUREAU OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS  
Division of Program Surveys  
Washington, D. C.

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WINTER VEGETABLE SCOUTING SURVEY

The following is a summary received from our two interviewers surveying the Texas winter vegetable section.

General Background for this Region

The winter vegetable section of Texas is composed of Dimmit, Zavala, Maverick and Frio Counties. Our work was confined primarily to Dimmit County, with some work in Zavala County. The Lower Rio Grande Valley section is the summer vegetable section and differs from the winter section in that the latter gets water from wells while the Valley farming is carried on by irrigation from the Rio Grande River. One exception is Maverick County where the vegetable land around Eagle Pass is watered from the River.

The main farming enterprise in both Dimmit and Zavala Counties is ranching; vegetables rank second in importance. Both areas get water from wells and there is a large potential vegetable land acreage; much land is being brought into cultivation this year in Dimmit County by drilling of additional wells. The representative of the State Experiment Station near Carrizo Springs was concerned about a possible water shortage if much more land were brought into cultivation; according to him, a geologic survey made a few years ago reported that the section approached the limit of maximum withdrawal of water in 1939 and the acreage under cultivation during 1943-44 will be as large if not larger than in 1939. This is of course a scientific problem and one about which we found no concern among the farmers.

Dimmit County vegetable producers suffered because of a depression in vegetable prices and a loss of a market back in 1932-35, and much of the land was retired from cultivation. However, the acreage of vegetables, especially carrots, has been gradually increasing since 1939 and there will be a big increase during 1943-44; indications are that the planned increase for this winter and next spring will be the biggest percentage increase in recent history. The producers made good money on carrots, onions and onion plants last year and this supplies the motive for the planned increase in acreage another year. The farmers were definitely optimistic about the outlook for another year; they expect the prices to be good because of an expected big demand for vegetables and they look for a good local market (that is, they expect no difficulty in selling their produce to local shippers.) However, accompanying this short-run optimism there is a fear of eventual overproduction and a depression of prices comparable to what farmers experienced back in 1932-1935. Frequently farmers spoke of the advisability of their trying out some other crops so that they would have something that would be practicable and profitable for them to produce if and when they could no longer sell carrots at a profit!

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The production of onion plants is concentrated in the hands of three or four large producers over the county (Dimmit) and there will be an increase in this acreage another year, due largely to the increase in demand for plants for Victory gardening.

The Zavala County AAA Chairman estimated that there would be a big increase in carrot acreage in that county another year, a smaller increase in onions, and little or no change in the acreage of spinach. These are the major vegetable crops. The acreage under water will be the same as last year but the increase in carrots and onions will come at the expense of oats. When vegetable prices got low a few years ago, farmers started planting oats; now that vegetable prices are good again this land will go back to vegetables. His explanation of the reason for this increase in vegetables was this remark: "Farmers are tickled to death with prices of vegetables--the price outlook is good and they look for a good market."

It should be emphasized here that the increase in acreage that is planned is to be in onions and carrots, both essential crops; there will be little if any change in the acreage of the non-essential crops. The change in acreage of carrots especially is due to the fact that this was a profitable crop last year and the outlook is good for another year.

#### Reactions to Government Program

There was little knowledge among the farmers of the government's program of discouraging the production of less essential crops. Where there was a knowledge of it, the attitude was a passive one. The fact that production is already concentrated on essential crops is doubtless the explanation of a lack of knowledge of the program as well as of the passive attitude about it. A program of discouraging unessential crops is of little importance in this region.

Actually, the farmers feel little need for a positive government program to get vegetable production; they prefer having no controls and letting supply and demand take care of the price of vegetables. That is to say, they would rather have no restrictions on acreage or prices. However, we did not find that these farmers were strongly opposed to price ceilings; they seem to assume that that is part of the war program and they accept it.

It is their feeling, however, that if there are to be ceilings above which prices cannot advance there should also be floors under prices below which the produce cannot fall. The vegetable farmer has always made his money by arranging to have his carrots, onions, etc., on the market before the supply becomes sufficiently heavy to depress the price; he tries to make enough off his crop during the early marketing to take care of the part of the crop which must be marketed later, usually at a lower price--often at a loss. In other words, he endeavors to get a sufficiently large part of the crop marketed early enough and at good enough prices to make a profit which will

be good enough to cover the cost of producing the entire crop, some of which is usually sold at a loss. Ceiling prices have the effect of keeping down prices at the beginning of the marketing season, at that time when he usually makes his profit off of vegetables. For instance, the ceiling price on onions last year was \$2.55 per 100 lbs. at the beginning of the season and farmers estimated that the opening price would have been as high as \$7.00 without ceilings because of a shortage of onions and because of the good demand. But farmers here are optimistic in spite of the ceilings because they feel that the demand during the war will be sufficiently high to force the price to remain near the ceiling throughout the marketing season.

There were no complaints against price ceilings except the ceiling for onions. The objection here was not to price ceilings per se but rather to the way in which the ceiling was set. At the beginning of the season the price ceiling was set at \$2.55 per 100 lbs. and it was announced in advance that it would be lowered to around \$2.30 after a month and went still lower later on. The farmers contend that this was ill-advised because it tended to reduce the production of onions; many farmers dug their onions and sold them before they were ready to harvest in order to take advantage of the higher price. Feeling was strong against this method of price fixing because it is restrictive, and as they see it a sound government price-fixing program should have as its aim maximum production. One producer-shipper reported that the OPA's price policy for the East had been a progressive one, one that permitted the price to advance rather than decline as it did here.

Acreage control is obviously unnecessary here since farmers are concentrating on the production of what the government has designated as essential crops. As we have pointed out above, production plans are tentative but if the outlook continues as favorable as it is now for carrots and onions, there is little doubt that the indicated increase in acreage will be followed up.

#### Farm Labor Situation

The most important "uncertainty" about which the farmers spoke was the labor situation. The outlook for getting sufficient help for farming at planting time will doubtless affect the actual acreage of carrots and onions in 1943-44. There is a large Spanish-American ("Mexican" to the local people) population in the towns of these counties and this is the main source of farm labor; it would be approximately correct to say that this is the labor supply for the vegetable farmers.

There was no difficulty with producing and harvesting the vegetable crop last year and the work was done by these Spanish-Americans. However, there are two problems that the farmers did not face last year. One is the fact

that there will be an increase in vegetable acreage this year and another is the fact that many of the local Spanish-Americans migrated to the sugar beet fields in Michigan, Ohio, etc., after the work was over here last year and have not returned. Normally, some migrate north to do this kind of farm work, but it appears that a larger percentage went this year. Whether the labor supply is sufficient here during the coming winter depends on whether these people return to this section of Texas. Many of them own their homes here, they dislike the cold winters in the Middle West, and the chances are good that they will return. But the farmers are not sure of that, and this fact causes uncertainty.

Some wondered whether they would not get jobs in that part of the country after the sugar beet work was over; one had heard that some had asked for release by the WMC as agricultural laborers so that they could take jobs as miners. Others wondered whether they would work here at \$2.00 and \$2.50 a day this winter after getting \$5.00 a day in the sugar beet fields. One wondered whether the government might not freeze them to their jobs in the Middle West thereby preventing their return to Texas for work this winter. It is our understanding that the sugar beet producers who recruited them here had to sign an agreement with the Texas State Employment Service guaranteeing to release the workers in time for them to return to Texas and perform the usual work of producing and harvesting the vegetable crop.

If there is not sufficient local Spanish-American labor to handle the work another year, the farmers prefer importation of labor from Mexico. They told us that the U. S. Immigration Service had announced locally that so far as the U. S. was concerned, the situation had been cleared for these people to come to the U. S. to perform farm work, but that the Mexican government was holding importation up until it got a guarantee on certain minimum standards with regard to wages and perhaps other treatment. The farmers understood that the Mexican government wanted a guaranteed minimum wage of 30¢ an hour (the current wages are 25¢ an hour); some farmers felt that they could pay this much another year if prices remain as good as they are on vegetables. There is a WRA camp at Crystal City, in Zavala County, for both German and Japanese relocatees; the opinion of farmers was divided on the question of whether they would be willing to use this labor. However, there is a movement under way to work out some kind of arrangement for the use of this labor, and the Texas Employment Service representative at Crystal City seems to be pushing for some kind of an arrangement that would be satisfactory to both the farmers and the WRA.

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
Agricultural Adjustment Administration  
Carrizo Springs, Texas

March 1, 1943

Mr. B. F. Vance  
Administrative Officer in Charge  
Agricultural Adjustment Agency  
College Station, Texas

Dear Mr. Vance:

This is in connection with the fixing of prices on vegetables. If such prices are fixed without an underlying floor to protect the producer, it will be impossible to get production. The terrific cost and outlay a producer must put forth to produce vegetables during the growing season in our area makes it prohibitive to take the risk against weather, pests, and the rising costs of labor. If prices are fixed without due consideration of the hazards, it means ruin to the producers. We are sorry we have no formula which could be used in fixing prices, as there are too many hazards, and the experience in fixing prices is too risky. In this business I have found that the fluctuating price on supply and demand will, over a long period, protect against disaster and loss unless he is to be limited when demand is great and not to be able to re-coup his losses which occur from almost unbelievable sources. We have seen hail completely eliminate expensive crops in a few hours, also crops destroyed by pests. There were five total losses from hail in this county last year. If producers were forced to sell on a cost plus basis than the incentive to produce hazardous crops would be eliminated. We believe that the Department of Agriculture, having some knowledge of the producers' hazards, is in a better position to determine not only the goals of production, but also the prices. There is a conflict between the OPA price control and the demand on the part of the Dept. of Agriculture for increasing production. This is overlapping, antagonistic, confusing and completely blocks production efforts.

We can meet production goal requirements if the whole problem is left to the Department of Agriculture. Our producers have confidence in the Department and will follow their instructions. On the other hand, if the OPA are to control the market, then our farmers don't know what to do. Our people do not want nor expect any advantages, but desire to be treated with the same consideration as the industrial workers. Our farmers are just as interested in winning the war as the industrial workers, and he has never struck, nor sought to strike in order to obtain fair prices for his products. He does not ask for

nor seek fixed hours of labor, but toils from daylight to dark and aft<sup>r</sup> after. Our farmers are satisfied to work on a parity basis, but parity must not be based on some hypothetical case that makes the word ridiculous. We must have parity on facts.

We will meet any goal the Department of Agriculture sets for us, if we are assured we will have the same treatment as the industrial worker and the manufacturer of munitions. It is foolish for the producer of essential foods to risk his entire capital outlay in one season, only to find that they have produced and have to sell at a price that eats up their capital, and thus ends their capacity to contribute to the war effort. It is a serious problem to agriculture to have its prices fixed by an agency we feel has no knowledge or sympathy with our problems, but seem more concerned with what the industrial worker has to pay for his food. In other words, I believe the producers in this area have a deep confidence in the Department of Agriculture and that it will protect them against disaster, but no such confidence in the agency in control of prices. It may be we have taken the wrong view, but when we find farm labor increased, not only in shortage, but the price of its has doubled, together with everything else, we feel that the price control has not inspired a great deal of confidence. Last year the farmer sold his hegari at 60 cents, and then had to buy it back at \$3.00. Cow feed which sold at \$1.60 is now \$2.90. I simply mention these two items as an example of why the farmer has no confidence in price control. Every repair and everything he has to do, whether it be purchase of supplies or use of labor, he knows the cost and it does not make sense to force him to sell at a price that fails to take into consideration his costs.

No farmer in this area is going to sit down or quit; we have too many boys in the service; but we hate to think of being brought out of this conflict in the same shape as in the last war. We feel our Government owes us fair treatment and we expect it. The farmers are dependent upon the Department of Agriculture to protect them against the other natural conflicting interests. It may be that those in authority think those in agriculture only represent a bureau, but I can tell you that farmers as a whole are back of their department, and believe in it. The writer has given you what he believes to be a picture of the locality in which he lives, and knows it is the sentiment of the vast majority of farmers scattered throughout the country. We hope the department will see that we get a hearing and that no price be fixed on agriculture products without due consideration to the cost and hazards of production.

Yours very truly,

J. H. Long,  
Chairman, Dimmit County ACA



